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ISSER HALPERIN RETURNS TO INTELLIGENCE DUTIES

(By Ze'ev Schiff, HAARETZ, Sept.17,1965)

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There is a striking similarity between Isser Harel (Halperin), the former Chief of Israel's Security Services, and David Ben-Gurion, the former Prime Minister. Those who know both of them claim that there is even a certain similarity in character. There may be something in this similarity which was one of the reasons for the faith they had in each other during 15 years. But it may also be the reason for their clash at the first difference of opinion. It is said that after Harel's resignation Ben-Gurion tried several times to induce him to return to his post, but in vain. They did not meet again for two years.

It was Ben-Gurion who discovered Harel and raised him to various positions of great importance, and Isser showed his appreciation by his faithfulness and by building up an Intelligence Service whose name was famous throughout the world. It was a case of mutual loyalty which also expressed the qualities common to both of them. It is difficult to gain their confidence, but once gained it was absolute. In most of security matters they were of the same opinion without there being any need of one influencing the other. For that reason one might say that Eshkol has appointed a "Ben-Gurionist" adviser, as regards his character and opinion on security matters. It will be very instructive to see how a man like Isser will adjust himself to the new regime, which is almost completely devoid of any assistants close to Ben-Gurion or his advisers.

It is not exactly known ^{when} B.G. met Isser Harel, but from the establishment of the State of Israel until Isser's resignation in 1963 they were almost in daily contact. With the establishment of the State Ben-Gurion appointed him Head of the Internal Security Services. For years the very existence of the Internal Security Services was kept secret. It was Isser Harel who actually organized them. They had previously been various branches of underground intelligence services. Today this job may seem simple, but in the first days of the State, which was still fighting for its very existence and many groups still imagined to be living under the mandatory regime with everything that that involved (lack of discipline, sense of public duty, an underground "partisan" character, etc) it was not so easy.

It seems that the Intelligence Service of Israel was brought onto democratic tracks faster than one might have expected in our country which is torn by party strife and wide differences of opinion between so many groups.

It would also appear that even Harel's resignation was an example of democratic behaviour. Instead of enforcing the will of the powerful Secret Service, Harel decided to resign, because his superior (by election) had made up his mind and was unwilling to change it. It is possible that, if the dispute had been a matter of conscience or outside interference, Isser would have accepted the verdict and would have remained on his post. Those who attribute to either of the two personal reasons for their dispute, do both of them an injustice. It was the least ugly of any dispute one could imagine. Even today, two and half years after Isser's resignation, it is still difficult to determine which policy was the better one or more just, the one towards the German scientists in Egypt, or the one towards Germany.

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In 1952 Isser was head of the Internal Security Service. Then B.G. called upon him to take over from Reuven Shiloah who had died. It was at that time that one began to learn from all the experiences of all intelligence branches, whose business was partly carried out in a "partisan" (haphazard) manner. In order to avoid duplication and rivalry between services, it was decided to set up a roof organization for all intelligence services, including the intelligence activities abroad. Reuven Shiloah had begun that task and Isser Harel continued with it. The roof organization was the Central Intelligence Agency. Isser found it, added many departments and branches to it, and made it an organization of renown. Together with that roof organization a council was set up consisting of all heads of various intelligence branches, and Isser Harel was appointed Chief. Close to his leaving the Premiership for the first time, Ben-Gurion appointed Harel to head the Intelligence Service. Since then and until Harel's resignation he was responsible for all security services with the exception of military intelligence. When B.G. returned to the Government, their ties became even closer.

Isser was found to be an "Intelligence" man of the first order. He is straightforward to the point of naivety, occasionally dry, but keeps his word to the end. In the beginning suspicious, he believes as soon as you have gained his confidence. That is the opinion of persons who have worked with him for many years. He did not become inflated by his successes and continued in his simple ways. Many people are now wondering what his reaction will be to his emerging from his anonymity.

In matters of intelligence he excelled in operations, organizational skill and gift for establishing relations with persons and organizations. He is an artist of coordination, collection of information, assisted by his painstakingly sticking to purpose and insisting on high quality work, keen on personally taking part in operations while being Chief of the Security Services. He has a keen sense for development of intelligence. He has a certain similarity of behavior to that of a bloodhound. All these characteristics are hard to acquire; you either have them or you don't. That was a reason why so many regretted his resignation, and there can be no doubt that our intelligence services as a whole are better off by his present appointment.

The question arises how Isser will adjust himself to his new duties. In his capacity as General Adviser it is part of his job to lay down high policy and to plan for the Prime Minister long-range security targets. No doubt Isser will be the strongest man among those surrounding Eshkol. It will be only natural that Isser will be given authority beyond the limitations of an ordinary adviser. It will be interesting to observe how the relationship between Eshkol and Isser will develop, in view of their difference in personality.

Though Isser has been appointed General Adviser, it is clear that his main interests will lie in the field of intelligence. That appointment had been recommended by the commission of two, after his resignation. Isser does not hide from his friends the fact that he had not been happy during the time of

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his activities in the private industrial market and that he has been trying to return to Government service ever since Eshkol became Prime Minister. Isser's return to Government service has nothing to do with the elections. That must be admitted even by those who prevented his return so far. In the interest of the State it cannot be denied that his return is beneficial. One must remember that the security of the State surpasses in its importance the squabbles between Rafi and the Alignment.

CURRICULUM VITAE

Isser Harel (Halperin) was born in Vitevsk in White Russia 53 years ago. His father was an industrialist and Zionism was imbued in his home. When Isser was a young man his family moved to Dvinsk. In 1930 Isser immigrated to Palestine within the framework of the Youth Movement. His mother followed later. As a member of the Kibbutz Hameuchad in Herzlia, which later set up Kibbutz Shefayim, he worked as physical laborer for two years. There he met his wife (who was born in Poland). Isser has an only daughter and a granddaughter of five to whom he is greatly attached. After he left the Kibbutz, Isser was for years living in Herzlia and worked in agriculture, including packing of citrus fruit. In 1942 he enlisted in the British Army. Since he had been a veteran member of Haganah, it was proposed that he remain in Palestine and be attached to the Supplementary Police Force, but from the first day of his service he was engaged in intelligence duties. Because of a quarrel with his British superior, he was discharged from the Army. He then joined the settlement Police Force. In 1944 he was already head of an Intelligence Branch of Haganah, and was in fact handling all matters of Shai (Sherutei Modi'in - the Haganah Intelligence Service), with the exception of Arab affairs. Soon he arrived at a senior position, Deputy to the Chief, David Shaltiel. Isser was then responsible for foreigners, especially Germans, Jewish subjects, etc.

At the outbreak of hostilities between Arabs and Jews in 1947 he was in charge of the Tel Aviv district and the South within the Intelligence Branch of Haganah, and was a member of the Tel Aviv Command Staff. In that capacity he began to deal with Arab affairs. When members of the IDF were graded into military ranks, he was made Sgan Aluf (Lt. Colonel) and was later made Chief of Security Services, early in 1953.

Translated by FSL M. Ravour

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